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ABSTRACT

The possibility of creating a "learning community" as a possible alternative or supplement to traditional indicators of community well-being is explored in relation to Australia's stability. It is argued that traditional economic rationalism-based indicators of community well-being, such as level of unemployment, frequently cause communities to develop a poor "employment self-image" that can actually create further damage by acting as the only reference point for successful communities. "Critical learning" is proposed as the basis for positive community learning. Learning in collectives is discussed as are the features of organizational learning. The concept of "communities of good practice" is proposed on the basis of Gee's seven characteristics of learning in the workplaces of the future. In the future, work will be managed by projects that will be conducted by teams of workers whose members must do the following: develop extensive rather than just intensive knowledge; shed narrow specialties and perform functions that integrate and overlap with other's functions; and understand the whole process and all functions within it. It is concluded that communities can achieve community development and/or sustainability by becoming learning communities characterized by the traits of communities of good practice. (Contains 11 references.) (MN)

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A LEARNING COMMUNITY

IAN FALK

Can learning be used to develop a framework for conceptualising community well-being and by so doing contribute to Australia's regional sustainability? Economic rationalist based indicators such as unemployment levels are often used by communities as indicators of community well-being. For communities in regional Australia which are unsustainable, marginally sustainable or sustainable, there is an issue that economic rationalism has failed rural Australia. Poor community self-image in matters such as unemployment can create further damage. It is the aim of this article is to explore the possibility of promoting community development as well-being through a community learning ethos, which is forwarded as a replacement for stagnant development based on economic rationalist models.

Following a search of the literature, there appears to be no overall conceptualisation or rationale of a 'learning society', 'learning organisation' or 'learning community' which identifies how group learning differs from the summative learning impacts of the individual members who learn in each of these sets.

Indicators of community well-being

Sustainability, regional and community development share strong underlying needs. There is the need to accept and implement change, the need for accepting diverse values and views, learning to work together, developing alternative means of reaching goals, leadership issues and team work.

There are symbolic terms which signify the struggle various individuals and groups are engaged in to fulfil these needs. Various terms are used commonly in the field of practice and research loosely encompassed by 'community development'. These are terms such as 'development', 'empowerment', 'critical thinking', 'social construc-

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tion', 'building a sense of identity', 'achievement and assessment of objectives', 'learning tool', and 'learning to make decisions'. The US based Community Development Society uses language such as 'capacity building', 'empowerment' (again), 'self-help' and 'local control'. [3]

"For communities in regional Australia ... there is an issue that economic rationalism has failed rural Australia."

Fundamental to all these notions is a capacity to learn. In some cases learning is a direct synonym for the other terms. Yet learning in its own right seems to have received little attention as a strategic process for implementing sustainability for regions and communities.

"learning in its own right seems to have received little attention as a strategic process for implementing sustainability for regions and communities."

Communities frequently develop their self-image and resulting degree of functionality more on indicators based on economic rationalism than other indicators of community activity such as membership of clubs, volunteer work and so on. Unemployment levels, for example, are often used by communities as indicators of community well-being [4]. Unemployment affects a community in more ways than one, including its youth sector who often have to move to larger centres in order to improve their chances of gaining employment. When changes to the agricultural sector and related 'bad times' are combined with the contemporary moves to resource rationalisation, evidenced in regional centres by the closure of services such as banking, medical and government offices, it is becoming increasingly difficult for rural communities to sustain a positive outlook amid such poor economic times. For communities in regional Australia ranging from unsustainable or marginally sustainable to sustainable, there is an issue that economic indicators such as poor 'employment self-image' of the community can create further damage by acting as the only reference point for being a successful community.

By contrast, so-called 'good' communities are reported to exhibit certain characteristics coming to be termed 'social capital' [4] As an example, a regional daily newspaper of Tasmania's northern region reports on the township of Deloraine, which won the '1997 Australian Community of the Year'. It uses words ranging from 'pride' [5] to those of Voss [6]: 'spirit', 'teamwork', 'working together', 'friendly', 'support for each other', 'everybody pulls together', 'co-operation between everyone', 'all walks of life working together', 'people band together ... on a project', 'grassroots community action', and:

"What has been our strength is we've brought different lifestyles, different ideas and different views together and moulded them into this community outlook." [7]

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The achievement is apparently even more noteworthy when set against the original impetus for repairing the community divisions of a decade or more ago caused by the 'greenies' versus the conservative residents: or "...the good, honest old timers" as one resident is quoted. [8]

"Over ... 25 years, economics has been spectacularly unsuccessful in its attempts to apply its models and theories to the reality of our civilisation. It's not that the economists' advice hasn't been taken. It has, in great detail, with great reverence. And in general, it has failed.'

It can be said that the Deloraine community has certainly been engaged in constant 'learning'. It has learned that there are benefits to working together for common purposes, and it has certainly demonstrated that it has learned to share certain values in order to achieve common purposes. Also, the various factions and groups whose values originally did not coincide, have presumably both maintained their individual (or separate group) values, and learned some new values about the benefits of sharing goals while retaining diversity.

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'Critical learning' as the basis for positive community learning

Any kind of non-reflexive learning requires the social participants to have an understanding and knowledge of society and the ways it works. This includes understandings of cultural diversity, the ways power and control interplay through social institutions and organisations, to the extent to which social participants make sense of and act on those forces and interactions. Critical learning would require that participants in the learning process understand and make connections between (a) individuals with their distinctive capabilities and experiences, (b) collectives (including groups, networks, teams) and (c) clusters of collectives (for example, more than one group or network which make up a community).

Such understandings must be taken into account as communities seek to re-establish their identity and viability in the post-economic rationalist era. The learning involved in such community processes will need to display features of critical learning described above, and will most often occur in groups.

Learning in collectives

In order to explain how community well-being might (or might not) relate to a community learning ethos, I will now look at the rationale for changes to conceptions of learning and some of the features of 'new' learning. New constructions and meanings of learning range from individuals linking and learning with instant and interactive global electronic network groups to the learning in collectives of work teams of the future whose group learning is in an envi-

ronment characterised by knowledge and skills which is distributed across other people and objects.

Organisational learning

It is commonly identified that Western society (at least) is experiencing a burst of rapid change in what is sometimes known as the information or technological revolution, or even the 'digital renaissance'. [9] The nature of the changes have been discussed for at least two decades, but seem to crystallise around these six points (made by Field) [10]. It should be noted that Field is discussing these points in relation to organisational learning in modern enterprises, but we can think of regional communities as being affected by the same forces as paraphrased here:

- Environmental turbulence

The speed of change plus amount of information produces a pressure to learn more, and more quickly;

- Knowledge as a primary source

The decline of the manufacturing and growth of service and information industries means organisations will depend more on the capacity to extend knowledge and apply it effectively;

- Multi-dimensional change

Integrated change across all sections of an organisation (e.g., employee relations, work organisation, skills, technology and information management) produces a need to know more across boundaries of specialities;

- More permeable, fuzzy boundaries

A breakdown of barriers between inside and outside the organisation, strategic alliances formed, visits across sites for, e.g., benchmarking; layers of internal management are flatter, computer and other networks facilitate collaboration and sharing, which produces a huge knowledge flow and necessity to learn;

- Reduced time frames

The pressure of reduced time frames results in a need to absorb new concepts, values and integrate new software and hardware;

- Internationalisation

Instant global communication and trade in a deregulated environment means a magnified urgency for a flexibly trained workforce in responsive organisations.

While the context for Field's discussion is that of organisational learning, it can be seen how each of these influences is equally as applicable at the level of the broader society.

Values, group learning & Communities of Practice

As noted earlier, people and groups of people in a society have sets of values which I will call 'value-sets' from now on. Some of these value-sets may be shared across all elements of the community. Other values and value-sets differ from one group or individual to another, while some values are specific to a particular individual, team, community or organisation.

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These values interact with each other when individuals, organisations and communities mix together. These interactions can be neutral, positive or negative. But it is the interactions between groups and people's values which result in change. The sets of values are often called 'cultures', and this is a term often used in relation to organisational change, where bringing about change is likened to changing the 'culture' of that organisation, workplace, team or individual.

"... it is the interactions between groups and people's values which result in change."

Because these value-systems are interlinked, there are strong forces against change in any part of society. Change in any one part of society will result in connected 'reactionary' ripples which serve to maintain the status quo.

Communities of Practice

According to Gee [ii] learning in the workplaces of the future will be marked by the following seven characteristics, consistent with Field's six conditions for modern learning organisations, summarised and largely (I hope) reflecting Gee's intent:

1. Work will be managed by projects, large and small;

2. Each project will be conducted by a team of workers;

3. The project process will involve knowledge which is both:

- distributed across people, tools and technologies, not held in any one person or thing, and
- tacit, in that the knowledge is gained by a team and cannot be verbally explained easily, and is built into the ways people communicate with team members and their work environment;

4. The process forms a network-like system of people, technologies and things in complete interaction where no one aspect contains (or need contain) the whole body of knowledge;

5. New workers are apprenticed into the network not primarily by overt instruction but by acquiring the tacit knowledge that is built into the system;

"Change in any one part of society will result in connected 'reactionary' ripples which serve to maintain the status quo."

6. In this process knowledge is dispersed, meaning that there is no need, given modern information and communication technology, for team members to be in the same place (geography) or always to communicate face to face;

7. Workers in these teams must:

- have extensive not just intensive knowledge,
- shed narrow specialities and perform functions that integrate and overlap with other people's functions

- must understand the whole process and all functions within it.

These features of Communities of Practice are compatible with the thoughts put forward in this paper about learning communities, and the significance of shared values and purposes.

Conclusion

A reformulation of 'learning' as a basis for reconceptualising the well-being of a community requires an explanation of meanings and characteristics of learning in contemporary society. I suggest that 'learning' consists of sets of valued social practices which vary from time to time and place to place depending on prevailing social and economic conditions. The importance of values lies as well in another direction, in that the value-sets held by individuals, groups and societies vary from one to the other, and the valued knowledge and skills around which the learning occurs is socially constructed - meaning constructed in and by groups as they learn towards common purposes.

"Learning can be used for the purpose of achieving ... peaceful social change."

The features of learning are influenced by general societal trends associated with times of rapid social and technological change. The identifying features of contemporary learning are also influenced by specific aspects associated with learning processes.

Learning is a response to a purpose and difference (change from one value-set to another). Learning can be used for the purpose of achieving (largely) peaceful social change. In many ways, the purpose is shaped by, and overlaps with, the differences in value-sets. Value-sets are held by individuals, groups including geographically defined communities based on, say, a township, organisations, institutions and societies. As a result, it is reasonable to argue that community learning occurs in pursuit of a purpose, and that the participants in the process share underlying values and value-sets which shape the common purpose. At the same time, a learning community will value the diverse values, skills and knowledge which are not immediately implicated in the shared purpose and values of the community effort in question

So community learning can be viewed as learning which has recognised community purposes and which will achieve a reconciliation of the implicated participants' value-sets. As mentioned, the purpose will often be shaped by, and be identified as a result of differences in value-sets.

It is through learning that communities develop and change in recognisable ways.

I propose that community development and/or sustainability can be achieved through sets of strategies based on reconciling differences in value-sets in achieving common purposes, spurred by an ethos of critique as communities seek to understand their nature and role in their own construction and reconstruction.

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